

Susan Mogul

Investigating Myself

Confessions of the Real Susan Mogul

How does one segue from *DRIVING MEN* – a road movie, a memoir, a story of a feminist artist who comes to terms with her dad, who finds love, who records her life – to a discussion of performance, autobiography, and documentary? And in doing this: Am I being self-indulgent? Self-promotional? And what is my persona right now? What role do I play, when I reflect upon on my own autobiography?



DRIVING MEN, 2008

You just watched *DRIVING MEN* for 68 minutes. Haven't you had enough of me already? Which me might you be sick of by now? The narrator? The woman in front of the camera at every stage of her life? Or, is it the persona of the questioning soul behind the camera, that drives *DRIVING MEN*?

DRIVING MEN is an investigation. I ask many questions, but the key and most provocative question is, «Why has SHE never married?» It is provocative because it is NOT good manners to ask a woman this question. It is provocative because it can't be easily answered, and it opens up a discussion of women's role in society.

In this film, I interrogate myself, and the men in my life – past and present. I chose to interrogate men only, because I wanted to examine my relationships with men. And it also let me interact with men in a different way. The camera was the mediator. I needed a mediator – a witness and a diplomat.

DRIVING MEN examines the archeological stuff, the evidence from my life: family photos and home movies. But it also examines, the evidence of my life work as an artist. Excerpts from previous autobiographical works, from 1973–2000, are integrated throughout *DRIVING MEN*. These video diaries, documentaries, and performances, build a larger self-portrait and autobiography, as they speak about my own Art /Life. And my Art/Life is key, a key to my identity. At its heart, *DRIVING MEN* is a memoir. Memoir means to remember. I am looking back and reflecting upon my life as a middle – middle aged woman. But I just don't look back. I also peek into the paradox and magic of creating art.

Filming, writing and editing is looking back and looking forward. Moving forward. Moving forward is an action and a performance. Action creates change. I change and am transformed by the filmmaking experience – because the films I make about myself are an inquiry. I use myself to inquire about life.

I think the most difficult and crucial thing for an artist is to find her own true voice. I began to discover or tap into my voice and subject matter when I was 23. And in my case, my «voice» also included me talking. Talking is something I like to do– sometimes too much. So I transformed something

I like to do, something I was criticized for doing too much of, into the nuts and bolts of my art. I started out talking about my mother. And I branched out from there.

I went to art school— not film school. First I was an artist – later I became a filmmaker. I consider myself both. I’ve been making autobiographical work for 38 years. So I’ve become a bit of an expert, not just on myself, but on the various approaches and elements of autobiography such as: the difference between autobiography and autobiographical, persona, memoir, diary, and direct address to the camera. I’ve briefly defined memoir. I will get to these other terms later with examples of my work.

But before that, I can’t resist gossiping with you about reactions from critics and other viewers to autobiographical films. A female French film studies professor who lives in LA wrote me an e-mail, “You adopt, as a subject and artist a frontal position. This frontality may create discomfort among European viewers. I prefer the sideways glance.” A British woman in Nyon said to my face, “I like the men in your film. But I don’t like you. You’re self-indulgent.” The opposite reaction came from Japanese college girls in Tokyo. “Susan we love you, you are so brave – you are so true to yourself.”

And then there’s the question I’ve heard over and over and over: “What does your mother, brother, father, boyfriend,– fill in the blank – think of your film? What does that have to do with the film you just saw? Why do you even care? Don’t you have your own mother to worry about?”

Because autobiography tends to be intimate, people make personal comments and ask personal questions. Many viewers don’t grasp the fact that I am presenting an edited version of myself and my experience. I transform myself and the other people in my films into characters, shape a story and express my point of view.

Autobiographical films – not just mine – both attract and repel. Why does autobiographical work produce such visceral reactions – both positive and negative? I think it’s because the viewer is confronted with the possibility of creating his or her own autobiography. That means looking at yourself. That’s scary. And putting your life out into the world. Frightening. Making work about yourself is not for everybody. If you can’t laugh at yourself – do not do this at home alone.

I began making work about myself and my personal experience in 1973. That’s when I moved to Los Angeles from New York to be part of the feminist art movement. I was a participant in two experimental feminist art programs in Southern California. One was at CAL ARTS, an art school. The other was at The Woman’s Building. It was a requirement to make work out of your personal experience. We were questioning and confronting the roles we were supposed to play as women. Role-playing, costumes performance, personal narrative, diaries, autobiography and subject matter that was supposed to stay behind closed doors (rape, incest, menstruation and the banality of our everyday lives) were characteristic of feminist art from the seventies. The Los Angeles feminist art movement was the setting, the environment,

the place where I began to find my voice as an artist. Making work about my life with humor and satire came easy to me. It didn't feel like a requirement. It felt like home. However, I never imagined it would turn into a lifelong pursuit.



I grew up having my picture taken – so did my five younger brothers and sisters. My mother was a passionate amateur photographer. She took this picture of me. My persona looks like: «Portrait of the Young Artist at Four».

But I never wanted to be an artist. I wanted to be an actress. I wanted to be an actress so I would be embraced and kissed by a handsome young actor.



When I was 16, I wanted to be a foreign correspondent. I wanted to be a foreign correspondent so I could travel all over the world and write letters back home. My definition of a foreign correspondent was a bit naive. I was more curious about relationships and romance than I was about world news. That's why I loved reading Dear Abby, an advice column in the American newspapers. In fact, I even wrote my own advice column for my high school newspaper. I called it Dear Libby. But nobody wrote to Dear Libby. So I wrote letters to Dear Libby. And, I answered them too.



I ended up becoming an artist because art was one of the only milieus or arenas where I could be myself. And, ask questions. Who am I? Where do I fit in? How do I fit in? Do I even want to fit in?

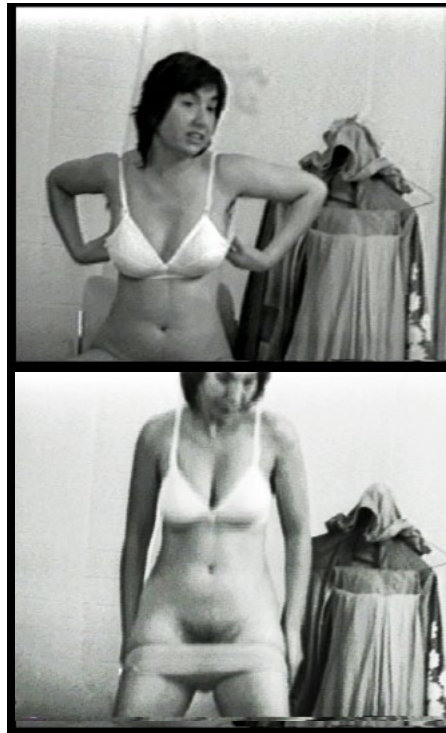
Dressing Up – Action & Monologue.

DRESSING UP is a video I made in 1973. I was 23. It is a seven-minute video performance. It is my first autobiographical work. It is not an autobiography because it draws on only one aspect of my life. This comical monologue is about bargain hunting with my mother.

I speak directly to the camera. The camera is my audience. I have an intimate one on one relationship with my camera. In “Dressing Up” my persona is Susan Mogul, the good daughter. Not totally.

I begin naked and in the end I am dressed up. It’s my idea of a reverse strip tease. Not very sexy. I eat nuts. I am noisy when I chew the nuts. I don’t act like a proper lady.

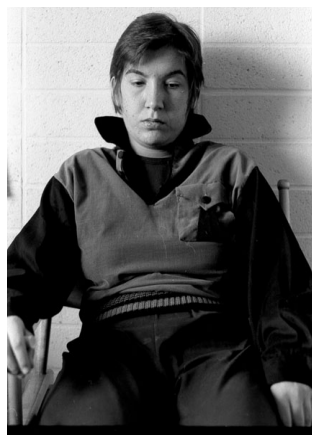
I am not fitting in very well, am I?



Self-Portrait as an Effeminate Man – 1973 – Photographs

I made these self-portraits the same time I made DRESSING UP in 1973.

I was exploring sexual identity in a different way here. What is feminine? What is masculine? In these self-portraits I was a woman dressed like a man trying to act like a woman.



I have had many personas in my work. Taking on persona is one way to investigate one’s self. What is a persona anyway? It is person’s social façade. The role in life an individual is playing.

I am NOT an actor. I may wear the costume of a character. But I am still Susan Mogul. By taking on a persona I can do or say things I would be afraid to do or say in real life.

Take Off – 1974 – Action & Monologue

TAKE OFF 1974. This ten minute video performance is about learning to masturbate with a vibrator.

«Two batteries, one orgasm.» – In one sense TAKE OFF is like a public service announcement or a TV commercial about vibrators and masturbation. My persona is a salesperson demonstrating a product.

It's also a satire of a videotape made by an American male artist Vito Acconci, a well-known artist. If a male can masturbate on video so can a woman.



But instead of making a serious intellectual video art work like Acconci, I created a cheerful, practical HOW TO DO IT video.

Not only has my work confronted sexual identity. It has also confronted art world conventions. It is rather subtle in TAKE OFF.



Mogul's August Clearance – 1976

But it is more explicit in my one-woman exhibition MOGUL'S AUGUST CLEARANCE, 1976.

I continue my mother's tradition of bargain hunting. But now I am Susan Mogul, the shopkeeper. I turn the art gallery into a store.

My photographs and photo collages are in bins and on clothes hangers. Even my work has a new persona. I don't put my work in a frame and label it "fine art".

I display my work as merchandise with big colorful price tags.

You purchase the work and take it away in a Mogul's shopping bag.

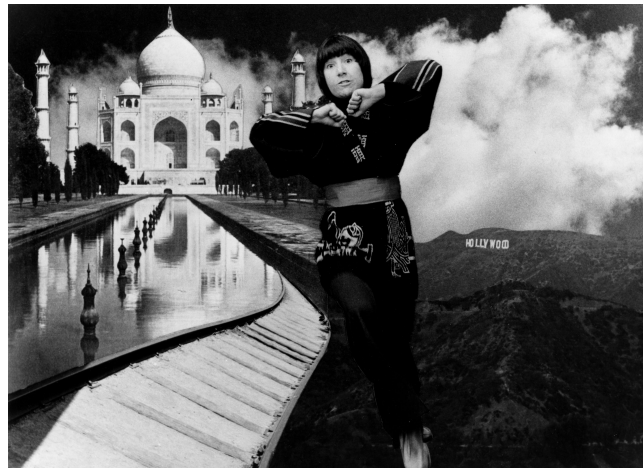
"Mogul's August Clearance" was a gentle critique and quiet rebellion against the elite art world. It is also one example of forcing high art and popular genres to co-exist in the same work. This work is satirical stab or critique at institutions and especially categories. This satirical approach is present in a lot of my work – whether the topic is my family, Hollywood, or being a childless woman.



I am driven by the desire or fantasy to fit in – somewhere, anywhere. And I like having my foot in several worlds. Yet, I am unable to make a commitment to one. And in the end, I am more comfortable being uncomfortable: being the outsider, an observer and commentator.

Hollywood Moguls” – 1975 –1979

I exploit this tension and inner conflict from a different angle in a series of photo collages titled HOLLYWOOD MOGULS 1975 –1979. If you open an American dictionary you will discover that my last name Mogul has many definitions. Such as: a bump on a ski slope, a diesel engine. This collage is titled Mogul Diesel.



But I didn't know how important my name was until I moved to LA from New York. Everybody in LA wants to be a Hollywood mogul. I thought I was one, after I moved there. Not really. A Hollywood Mogul is a tycoon, a powerful person working in the media. This collage is titled "Mogul Ruler".

My HOLLYWOOD MOGULS have imaginary identities and absurd personas. Some are masculine, others feminine. This collage is titled MOSES MOGUL PARTS THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS.



In *CRISIS IN CAPITOL* I am a sultan in a turban and high heels. I am conducting the destruction of the Capitol Records building, a Hollywood landmark.

In most of these collages «My people» are attempting to take over Hollywood. This collage is titled: *CRISIS IN CAPITOL*.



Mogul is Mobil – 1974

This was my first photo collage. 1974. I wanted the world to know that I had finally learned to drive in my adopted hometown of LA. I was a feminist – the personal was the political. I felt as if I was reborn when I learned to drive. People send out birth announcements when they have a baby. Why not advertise this major accomplishment in my life? So I had a post-card made, “Mogul is Mobil” and mailed it out to everybody. But I really wanted something bigger. I wanted my own billboard.



MOGUL IS MOBIL and the *HOLLYWOOD MOGULS* were designed to be posters or billboards. I like these popular forms because they use everyday language, have a sense performance and often speak directly to the viewer.

I loved these popular forms but I wanted to replace the content. As a feminist I was defining myself and making myself visible on my own terms. I was selling a different kind of story about myself, and women in particular.

I never did get that billboard.

Waiting at the Soda Fountain – 1979



But I did give women the opportunity to get discovered. **WAITING AT THE SODA FOUNTAIN 1979**, was a performance at an actual Hollywood soda fountain called Columbia Drugs.

I brought to life the myth that a woman could get discovered if she waited at a Hollywood drug store. I gave screen tests to 13 women.

My persona is the cliché Hollywood film director. I wear riding pants and a beret. Don't forget I'm an artist too.

The Last Jew in America – 1983/1984 Monologue/ Performance/ Props & Music

THE LAST JEW IN AMERICA is a performance from 1983/84. My persona is an Assimilated American Jew. I am part stand up comic / part professor. I lecture on the conflicts and contradictions of Jewish assimilation in America and through history. How does one assimilate into the dominant culture and yet maintain Jewish identity at the same time?

Here I pose the question, "Why has there been no great Jewish art?" The Second commandment states, "Thou shalt not make graven images." Jewish interpretation. No figurative art. No art with people. Liberal rabbis in the middle ages allowed profiles but nothing full face.



Fitting In – 1980 – 1987

As you see, a lot of my work tackles the concept of fitting in. I made several portraits in the eighties where I literally try to fit into or adapt to my environment. Almost like a chameleon.

Trying to fit in with the kitchen wallpaper. The wallpaper has images of vegetables on it and real vegetables nailed to it.



Mondrian and Me in Mom's Bar Mitzvah Dress – 1987

I am Mom and the artist Mondrian. I am camouflaged. The tension of high art, fashion, and Mom.



News from Home – 1985–1987



Here I am 38 years old and I am dressing up like Mom. I fit into her clothes perfectly. Mom says, "Susan, you have my old body." She can't fit into these clothes anymore.

NEWS FROM HOME 1985–1987 was a performance I did in many different venues. My persona is both Daughter and Mother. I modeled Mom's clothes in a fashion show. And I read twenty years of correspondence from mom.



When Mom found out I was reading her letters in public, she began every letter with the copyright sign.



Dear Dennis, 1988 –

It is true I am the only one on camera and the only one speaking in "Dear Dennis", 1988, my four-minute video letter to Dennis Hopper.

But, there is one difference. I am talking to Dennis Hopper. In this monologue, I am attempting to have a relationship, a dialogue with another person. The camera now has the persona of Dennis Hopper.



I began dressing up in my video DRESSING UP in 1973. And I continued dressing up in all kinds of outfits and personas for about 15 years. I stopped dressing up after my last performance of NEWS FROM HOME in December 1987. And once I stopped performing on stage, I began filming again.

Before 1988 my videos and performances were strictly monologues. Since 1988 my video/films have incorporated dialogues. And gradually evolved into personal documentaries.

When I began making video diaries my voice changed dramatically. My persona and my voice. No more costumes. My voice was now poignant – not just comical. The camera became a window to look in and to look out.



Prosaic Portraits 1991, 45 minutes

PROSAIC PORTRAITS, IRONIES AND OTHER INTIMACIES 1991, is a travel diary in Eastern Europe. It is my first video diary. I record my daily life in Warsaw, Poland and in other parts of Eastern Europe for eight weeks. I speak to the camera. And I have conversations with many artists and intellectuals I meet on my journey.

A record of daily life is called a diary. A diary tends to be written as you live it. Spoken as you feel it. A diary embraces digression and free association, immediacy and distance, the present and the past, the private and the public. The diary is a perfect fit for me. As I have a tendency to digress and come back.



Everyday Echo Street 1993, 33 minutes

EVERYDAY ECHO STREET 1993, is the video diary of a single Jewish woman who reflects upon her life and relationships in a working class Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles.

It was an investigation of the concept of home and my sense of place in a neighborhood I had lived in for twelve years.

I made this video diary the summer I turned 44. I filmed every day for six weeks. "Echo Street" alternates between my public life and my private life. I walk through my neighborhood and interact with various people in the present. I look out my window into the courtyard and reflect upon the past.



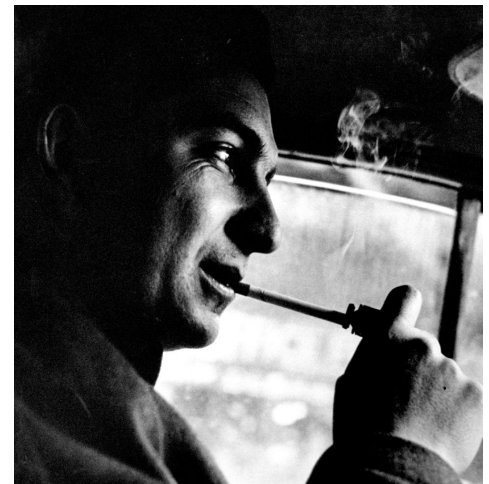
EVERYDAY ECHO STREET is a summer diary of a 44 year–old woman. DRIVING MEN is a memoir of a 58 year–old woman. Both films use windows to look out and to look in. The apartment window. The car window. One takes place in a neighborhood over the course of one summer. The other takes place on the road and covers my life–time. One film was completed in three months. The other took five years. Both films are about the desire to connect with people and examine how the past informs the present.



What is my experience from making autobiography for 38 years? What impact has it had on my art and my life? I know making autobiographical films in particular holds the potential for revelation and a sense of discovery. It is both exciting and scary because I never know exactly where I am going. And I constantly have to remind myself to trust and follow my intuition, instincts, and curiosity.

When I started filming DRIVING MEN I had no idea that my father would be the heart of the film. I didn't know when I filmed him, that that would be the last time I saw him. I didn't know I would fall in love. The list of surprises goes on and on.

But, the most important aspect of making autobiographical work, is difficult to put into words. As I said in my introduction – making autobiographical work transforms me. It centers me. It makes me feel connected. Grounded. And it allows me to keep defining redefining and developing my voice, intellect and who I am in relation to the world around me. And it's cheaper and a lot more fun than therapy.



What questions do I want to ask myself now? I'm 61. What do I want to explore or investigate in my next film? Will I still be in the picture? Or off to the side?

Oh, wait. I forgot to tell you about the film critic in the Village Voice, a New York newspaper. She liked Driving Men but she did complain about one thing. She wrote, «Too many shots of Mogul showing off her naked breasts.» I thought about that for a long time. And then I got inspired. I started taking photographs again and made a new collage. Something to keep me busy while I figure out my next film. Do you think my naked breasts really bothered the film critic? How could they? They don't look bad for 61. I think what SHE really wanted was to see my entire body.



The title of this new work is: LOTS OF MY COLLAGES AND THE ONES I'M WEARING

Susan Mogul made her first films during the 1970s in the context of the feminist art programs at the California Institute of the Arts (CAL ARTS) and the Los Angeles Woman' Building. Born and raised in New York artist/filmmaker Mogul has worked and lived in LA since 1973 and created a multilayered oeuvre situated between video art and documentary.

Filmography

DRESSING UP 1973

UNTITLED 1973

TAKE OFF 1974

DEAR DENNIS 1988

PROSAIC PORTRAIT, IRONIES AND OTHER INTIMACIES 1991

EVERYDAY ECHO STREET 1993

I STARE AT YOU AND DREAM 1997

SING, O BARREN WOMAN 2000

DRIVING MEN 2008

SUSAN MOGUL'S WOMAN'S BUILDING 2010

Website: <http://www.susanmogul.com/index2.php>

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